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ABSTRACT

The restructuring of the Romance language program at Howard University to improve oral proficiency involved modification of goals, syllabi, classroom activities, and testing. Goals were adapted to American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL)/Educational Testing Service (ETS) guidelines for oral proficiency. Assessment of French and Spanish programs led to revision of the syllabi and activities descriptions for each level. Success of the restructuring process has required teacher cooperation and support, and a workshop for familiarization with the goals and techniques of teaching and testing for oral proficiency. A preliminary diagnostic review is administered to students at each semester's beginning, with results guiding class activity planning. Vocabulary use in context is stressed. Language laboratory use is required at levels 1 and 2, and students are encouraged to attend a free listening laboratory. Opportunities for students to make class presentations are substantial, and role-playing is a popular activity. Teachers are encouraged to build personal libraries of listening materials and visual aids. Midterm and final testing is by interview using ACTFL/ETS guidelines and strategies. Listening comprehension tests and quizzes are also used. Point and percentage systems have been adapted for evaluation. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

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Restructuring a Traditional Foreign Language Program For Oral Proficiency

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Howard University is a comprehensive university offering basic instruction in French, German, Italian, Russian, Portuguese, Spanish, and several African languages. The French and Spanish basic language programs are the largest. Each semester, the Department of Romance Languages serves approximately two thousand students in multi-sectioned elementary and intermediate courses in these two languages.

Like many other foreign language departments, the Department of Romance Languages at Howard has traditionally used grammar-based syllabi to define the basic language courses. Until about two years ago, this seemed to be the easiest way to plan and coordinate instruction in the multi-sectioned courses in spite of the obvious shortcomings of such planning. More recently, however, students and teachers have been disillusioned with the traditional, grammar-oriented approach to language learning because it has led to little functional speaking ability. This paper outlines the steps implemented to restructure the program at Howard for more oral proficiency and describes the modification of syllabi, classroom activities, and testing.

The immediate goals of the restructuring process have been to train students to be able to use the language both in and out of the classroom; to perform adequately in real-life situations; and to instill a sense of language confidence and real language competency. Following the ACTFL/ETS guidelines for oral proficiency, goals were modified to reflect 1) what the student *can* do (function), 2) the essential vocabulary for various subjects and themes (content), and 3) the quality and precision of the language (accuracy).

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The coordinators of the French and Spanish language programs and the Director of Undergraduate Studies began by conducting a thorough assessment of the program during the spring semester of 1985. At that time, the course syllabi and the schedule of class activities stated all objectives in terms of the grammar to be taught week by week (i.e., Week One—Definite Articles; Week Two—Indefinite Articles, etc."). The first step in restructuring the program was to revise the syllabi and descriptions of activities for each level in order to make them guides or invitations to language learning which reflected positive encouragement, and which stimulated new interest in the language. For example, the revised description of activities for the second week of a Level I French or Spanish class states:

> You will learn the names of the days and months and numbers from 1 to 10. You will also learn to give brief information about yourself and to identify objects in the classroom. In addition, you will learn to ask and answer questions.

Students now are told what they will be able to accomplish and when. Yet, because the presentation of grammar and structure is still an integral part of the program, at the end of the description of performance goals for each week, students are given specific references in the textbook for grammar study.

The success of the restructuring project has required the cooperation and support of all teachers, especially those involved with the elementary and intermediate level courses, and it has been necessary to conduct at least one workshop in order to familiarize colleagues with the goals and techniques of teaching and testing for oral proficiency. Faculty members have also been encouraged to participate in other proficiency workshops such as those sponsored by ACTFL, and several instructors have participated in the ACTFL/ETS tester training workshops held at Pennsylvania State University in 1985 and 1986.

After the familiarization process, the next step in the restructuring project was to insure that proficiency-based materials and activities would become major components in the classroom. The same textbook (*Invitation*, 2nd ed., in French and *Dicho y Hecho*, in Spanish) is used for three consecutive semesters in the Levels I, II, and III courses in both French and Spanish. As a result, teachers have more time to teach for proficiency and to incorporate communicative activities in their

classes, and students have more time to improve their aural/oral skills while studying the essential structures of the language.

At the beginning of the semester, instructors at each level give a diagnostic review. Students in Level II French and Spanish classes, for example, receive a weekly class schedule which states that during the first two weeks of class they will refresh their memory of things learned in Level I by preparing good oral and written responses to a series of twenty questions. The questions are grouped so as to elicit meaningful and interesting responses from each student, and focus on vocabulary and structures which are important for functional ability in the language. Students are asked to give their name, age, and birthdate and should be able to tell where they grew up and where they live now. They should tell if they have a roommate and should describe their room and list some of their possessions. Students' descriptions of their likes and dislikes, their leisure-time activities, what they did and where they went last weekend, and what they are going to do next weekend are excellent indicators to help the teacher assess their mastery of everyday vocabulary and basic structures.

The diagnostic review for students in the Level III classes requires them to answer some of the same questions as the Level II students but includes other questions which are more challenging since they review the structures taught in Level II. Students are asked to describe what their life was like when they were children, where they grew up, what their favorite pastimes were, where they would go on vacation, what they used to do during vacation, what they wanted to become, and what their favorite classes were in school. Basic vocabulary and structures are reviewed as students tell what time they got up the previous morning, what time they went to bed the night before. As they describe their usual morning routine, they are to use as many reflexive verbs as possible. They also tell what they did last weekend, in as much detail as possible, and what they intend to do next weekend.

The diagnostic review is especially critical at the beginning of Levels II and III. It allows the teacher and the students to get acquainted, but more importantly, the teacher is able to diagnose and respond to individual learner needs. In order to structure a more effective learning environment, teachers use the results of the diagnostic review to include numerous class activities in which students are strategically assigned to small groups, according to their strengths and weaknesses, and where they will have more opportunities to speak the

target language. These activities are vital to the success of an oral proficiency-oriented approach to teaching and are ideal in giving all the students a chance to speak, especially when instructors have large classes.

In each lesson, instructors stress the acquisition and enrichment of vocabulary, in context, to allow students to express things which are true about themselves. All of the grammar which is taught on the elementary and intermediate levels, traditionally, continues to be taught. However, since the focus is on oral communication, teachers constantly review and emphasize the use of certain structures which are crucial to functional ability in the language: the present tense, the future immediate (to be going to do something), the past tenses.

With the increased emphasis on improving listening skills, students in the Levels I and II courses attend the language laboratory for regularly scheduled fifty-minute sessions twice a week. They use the lab manuals which accompany the *Dicho y Hecho* and *Invitation* textbooks and listen to recorded materials which are based on their textbooks. They practice pronunciation and do structure and transformation drills, but more importantly, they do exercises designed to increase listening comprehension. Several instructors arrange for videotapes to be shown during some of the language laboratory sessions as a means of providing excellent visual and oral reinforcement and enrichment. Video materials commonly used in the elementary and intermediate classes include *Learn French the BBC Way 1 and 2* and the *Zarabanda* series (Spanish).

In addition to their required laboratory sessions, students are strongly encouraged to attend the "free-listening laboratory" for additional individual practice as often as they wish. They may listen to course materials or supplementary materials preselected by their instructors (poems, songs, and tapes of conversations and interviews with native speakers) and made available for use in the "free-listening lab" during a given period. Students who desire to practice the language at home are encouraged to bring in blank cassettes and/or tape recorders in order to tape various materials. Practice at home is especially valuable for the Level III students since they go to class only three days a week and do not have scheduled lab sessions.

Students really enjoy talking about themselves and listening to their classmates talk about themselves. Instructors provide increased opportunities for them to speak in situations modeled after real-life contexts. As new vocabulary and structures are presented and practiced in class, instructors monitor the students and stress correct pronun-

ciation. Next, students are assigned short talks on specific themes related to survival and social skills which they prepare at home and then present in class. In Level I classes, for example, after only a few weeks of instruction, students are able to give a short talk in which they introduce themselves to their classmates in the target language. They tell where they live, name some of the objects they possess, comment on how they like the courses at the university, tell what days they have class and how many classes they have, tell their likes and dislikes, and describe their personality. As the semester progresses, they present other talks in which they plan a dream vacation or describe their family, for example. The emphasis on speaking is reinforced in the Level II and III classes as students present similar talks on topics presented in their textbooks.

An instructional activity which students find very motivating involves role playing. They enjoy the game-like atmosphere which results when one or two classmates act out situations which have been typed in English on index cards and given to students for impromptu role playing. Below are a few examples:

1. Imagine that you are in a small restaurant in Paris. You want to order a meal. (Level I)
2. You are being interrogated by the police in a foreign country. They want to know everything you did yesterday. Tell them, in detail, how you spent the day. (Level II)
3. You have been asked to advise some new foreign exchange students on how to do well in their studies at Howard. Tell what advice you will give them. (Level III)

As a result of such constant and meaningful speaking practice, students find it easier to speak, speak more, and show an increased desire and ability to "create" with the language.

Although the activities described above are time-consuming, teachers find that they provide a most effective means of systematic evaluation of students' progress in mastering oral skills and help to put more balance in evaluating what the students are able to do. As a result of the restructuring process, the prior emphasis on writing/grammar and reading in the basic language program at Howard University has been replaced with a fifty-fifty balance between the oral and written skills.

The key to successful proficiency-oriented teaching is to keep the ACTFL descriptors in mind when designing instructional activities. In the elementary-level courses, instructors are reminded that in spite of the many grammatical structures that may be taught during the term, students have a real desire to talk about themselves and should be encouraged to do so. Instructors at all levels seek innovative ways to have students practice speaking in situations which lead to and reinforce mastery of the vocabulary and structures of the "Novice" level subject areas: basic objects, body parts, colors, clothing, the day's date (weekdays, months, year), family members, foods, numbers, times, and weather. However, even at this level, opportunities are provided for students to begin to demonstrate "Intermediate" level behavior and as the necessary vocabulary and structures are presented, students participate in situations requiring them to narrate and describe in past and future time.

In the Level III and IV courses, instructors guide their students to be able to perform the linguistic tasks of the Intermediate Level of the ACTFL/ETS proficiency rating scale. More stress is placed on helping the students to create with the language, answer questions, ask questions, fulfill minimum courtesy requirements, handle routine travel needs, and get into, through, and out of simple survival situations. At this level, instructors seek ways to encourage students to move beyond talking almost exclusively about personal welfare (own background, family, interests, recreational activities, work, travel)—as they did on the elementary level—to talk about other people, familiar places, and current events.

Each instructor in the basic language program is encouraged to build a personal library of materials for listening practice as well as visual aids designed to stimulate conversation. They try to provide realistic contexts which will elicit the recall and use of the vocabulary and structures necessary for functional ability in the language. On the elementary levels, these materials are used largely for description but once the past tenses have been introduced, they provide excellent stimuli for description and narration. Items which are effective stimuli to speaking in the target language include slides, magazine pictures, photographs and illustrations from textbooks, and authentic materials from the target culture: telephone books, advertisements with symbols, travel brochures, train schedules, hotel registration forms, and menus from restaurants.

Instructors find that the instructional activities described above are extremely stimulating and are excellent confidence builders for their

students. As the activities are modified and the practice situations are made more complicated from time to time, they represent challenges which the more capable students find quite motivating.

One of the most important steps in the curriculum development project is the development and administering of valid and effective tests. The basic premise is that a proficiency-based program must make use of proficiency-based testing. Formative test preparation and testing throughout the semester is left up to individual instructors. Departmental midterm and final examinations are prepared by several faculty members who teach sections of a particular course. Prior to the effort to restructure the basic language program, these departmental examinations were, for the most part, discrete-point item tests which measured knowledge of grammatical structures, vocabulary, and cultural information. Currently, a mandatory oral-proficiency interview has been instituted as a part of the departmental midterm and final examinations in Levels I, II, and III. The interview is based on the guidelines and strategies of the ACTFL/ETS oral interview, but because they are approximately twenty-five students in each class, it was necessary to shorten the interview to no more than ten minutes. Instructors are given a two-week period at midterm and at the end of the semester in order to set up appointments with each student during office hours.

When the student comes for the interview, first the teacher/interviewer greets the student and has a short warm-up period designed to put the student at ease. Another purpose served by this warm-up period on all levels is to allow students to demonstrate their ability to function at the Novice level (greetings, etc.). Next the teacher asks a series of questions which measure the student's acquisition of the communicative skills which have been taught up to that pont. Before the interview ends, the teacher allows the student to ask questions and/or to role play in a situation described on a three-by-five index card.

In one example of this technique an authentic menu from a French or Spanish restaurant in the Washington, DC, area is used to test the student's ability to "order a meal." The student is given a copy of the menu, and the teacher plays the role of a waiter/waitress. The teacher asks a series of questions which will allow the student to use the appropriate vocabulary and structures necessary to carry out the particular task. This technique may be used for testing speaking at various levels. At the novice level, the teacher may simply want to test control of verbs in the present tense and the use of specific vocabulary for foods. At the intermediate or advanced level, however, the teacher

could complicate the situation by saying, for example, that a particular item that the student ordered from the menu is unavailable, or by suggesting that the student try something other than what was ordered. In brief, there are a variety of methods of getting the student to demonstrate the ability to use the language function being tested.

The following system has proven quite adaptable for evaluating the results of speaking tests at Howard. Pronunciation, vocabulary, structures, and fluency (ease of speech) are assigned a value on a four-point scale. Four points in a given category mean that the student has performed at the maximum expected level and would be translated as an "A" for that particular skill. Three points are given if the student performs well but not at the maximum expected level, and would correspond to a grade of "B" for the particular skill. Two points indicate average performance, and one point is given for below average but minimally acceptable performance. If students are required to ask questions in an interview situation, for example, this would constitute an additional category to be evaluated similarly. Students who can ask several questions using the appropriate vocabulary and structures would receive four points or "A," and students who are not able to ask any questions receive no points for that category. The total grade for the speaking test would be an average of the points in all categories.

As a follow-up to the listening activities in the laboratory and in class, students are given quizzes and tests throughout the semester designed specifically to measure listening comprehension skills. More importantly, the departmental midterm and final examinations test listening comprehension separately as a vital communicative skill in life-like situations. Students are given aural comprehension tests which require them to listen to recorded telephone messages, short radio announcements about the weather, sports events, or concerts, for example, and try to obtain specific information following instructions given beforehand (i.e., "Why can't Mr. X come to the meeting?" "What will the weather be like tomorrow?" "Who will play against team X this weekend?" "At what time will the concert end?").

The revised system adopted for grading in the departmental courses is as follows: 40 percent for graded class work (writing, reading comprehension, oral presentations, culture quizzes), 20 percent for laboratory (listening comprehension) or graded oral work (in Level III courses which do not have scheduled lab sessions), 20 percent for the departmental midterm examination, and 20 percent for the departmental final examination. Each of the departmental examinations consists of

separate tests measuring listening comprehension and speaking (oral and interview), and a written test of grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and culture. The grade on the test of writing, reading, and culture is assigned a weight of 50 percent of both examinations. The oral interview and listening comprehension grades have each been assigned a weight of 25 percent of the total grade on the departmental exams. Thus, oral/aural skills now represent 50 percent of the students' grades under the new system.

The Department of Romance Languages at Howard University continues a vigorous campaign to expose teachers to proficiency-oriented techniques for teaching and to encourage them to use these techniques in their classes, not only in the basic language program, but at all levels. A natural link has been established between classroom activities and testing procedures as the program coordinators aim to insure that each test includes items which measure students' ability to use their foreign language in authentic real-life contexts. The restructuring process is a continual one. The department is currently seeking ways to incorporate more communicative activities in the courses for French and Spanish majors and minors, which remain, for the most part, traditional in nature.

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